



## **Australian Government**

Australian Government response to the  
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs,  
Defence and Trade report:

Inquiry into Australia's defence relationships  
with Pacific Island nations

AUGUST 2021

## **Introduction**

The Australian Government welcomes the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's final report on its 'Inquiry into Australia's defence relationships with Pacific Island nations', and thanks the Committee members for their work in delivering the report and its recommendations. The Australian Government also thanks those who contributed through submissions and at public hearings.

The report provides a number of insights into the history of Australia's defence policy in the Pacific, how Australia's defence and security engagement is currently perceived as part of Australia's Pacific Step-up, and how it could be enhanced.

These insights are valuable and will contribute to Department of Defence's thinking on its security relationships with the Pacific. It is important that Defence and partner policy and security agencies continually consider public discourse and stakeholder feedback to best adapt and position Australia to support a sovereign, secure, stable and prosperous Pacific.

It is also important to stress that Australian security sector engagement is increasingly a joint inter-agency effort, particularly in the Pacific where a number of our counterparts do not have militaries. Defence engagement and programs are often intrinsically linked with other agencies' core business and it is imperative these are aligned. Improving inter-agency security policy and program coordination remains a priority.

The Australian Government looks forward to constructively engaging with the Committee's recommendations to strengthen Australia's defence and security partnerships in the Pacific and maximising the impact of the broader Pacific Step-up.

## **Recommendation 1**

The Committee recommends that the Department of Defence seek opportunities to continually improve the capacity and capabilities of the Defence Cooperation Program (DCP), and to increase the inclusion of Pacific Islands' representation and leadership in DCP design.

## **Response to Recommendation 1**

The Australian Government supports the recommendation.

Defence is continually looking to improve the capacity and capabilities offered through the DCPs we maintain with our partners. Partners are included in program design and review, recognising that programs should be demand-driven. Shared priorities are set through regular defence cooperation dialogues at which cooperation is reviewed and new opportunities identified. Our personnel based in the Pacific in representational, advisory and embedded roles also regularly engage with their counterparts to ensure our cooperation is targeted and responsive.

The DCP is of mutual benefit to Australia and our partners. Activities are increasingly reciprocal, with the number of two-way exchanges growing. Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel exercise with their partners in Australia and in the Pacific. We endeavour to learn from each other, enhance interoperability, and cooperate so we are collectively prepared to respond to common security challenges in the region.

For example, in 2020 Defence responded quickly to support the Pacific's COVID-19 response and recovery, with ADF personnel remaining in-country where safe to do so. Defence reprioritised DCP resources to support health response planning and coordination, air and sea lift support, delivery of personal protective equipment and supplies and information-sharing.

## **Recommendation 2**

The Committee recommends the Department of Defence and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, via the Office of the Pacific (OTP), continue to improve collaboration to effectively monitor, evaluate and respond to diplomatic, environmental and defence challenges in the Pacific region.

## **Response to Recommendation 2**

The Australian Government supports the recommendation.

The Office of the Pacific (OTP) was established in 2019 in order to support Australia's deepening engagement with the Pacific, enhance whole-of-government coordination and drive implementation of our regional activities, consistent with the Pacific's priorities. At the heart of OTP is the recognition that effective collaboration is critical. This is reflected through an adaptable structure that can deliver on economic, people-to-people and security policy objectives as well as responding to immediate needs, such as COVID-19.

To support effective collaboration, OTP includes staff from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) alongside embeds and transfers from agencies including the Departments of Defence, Home Affairs, Finance, Agriculture, Water and the Environment, National Attorney-General's and Health, Treasury, Australian Federal Police, the Infrastructure and Project Finance Agency, Australian Maritime Safety Authority and Indigenous Australians Agency. A Defence Senior Executive Service officer is embedded in OTP to support OTP's operation and ensure alignment.

Agencies are continually reviewing how to better align policies, programs, resources and capabilities to meet regional challenges.

### **Recommendation 3**

The Committee recommends the Government pursue further opportunities for collaboration with state government partners to support Australia's Pacific Step-up. This would broaden the scope of possibilities for various levels of government to cooperate, facilitate partnerships and share capabilities in support of the Pacific Step-up.

### **Response to Recommendation 3**

The Australian Government supports the recommendation.

State and territory governments have a key role to play in Australia's engagement with the Pacific. A number of Pacific Step-up initiatives leverage our state and territory capacities, including our flagship Pacific labour mobility programs, the Pacific Flights Program, educational partnerships, diaspora engagement and COVID-19 support, including facilitating movement of goods and services, as well as repatriations of Pacific nationals.

The Australian Government continues to work with state and territory counterparts to achieve Pacific Step-up objectives, particularly in the areas of enhancing education and employment linkages, legislation development and emergency services. Collaboration with the Pacific and the states and territories is determined by Pacific priorities and resource availability from states and territories to provide enduring support to programs.

#### **Recommendation 4**

The Committee recommends that the Government pursue further opportunities to integrate ADF cooperation with Australian Industry to provide capability solutions in support of the Pacific Step-up.

#### **Response to Recommendation 4**

The Australian Government supports the recommendation.

A robust, resilient and competitive Australian defence industry is a fundamental enabler of the ADF's capability and our international engagement. The Australian Government is committed to developing our sovereign industrial capability, supporting leading-edge innovation and working in partnership with industry to strengthen our relationships and increase the sovereign capability of Pacific nations.

The Australian Government continuously considers how to effectively leverage Australia's defence industry and innovation capabilities in support of the Pacific Step-up. Defence relies on a number of private sector partnerships to carry out its Pacific Step-up commitments. For example, the Pacific Maritime Security Program's (\$2 billion over 30 years) 21 Guardian-class patrol boats are being built in Australia. Defence's delivery of key security infrastructure projects throughout the Pacific has, to date, contributed approximately \$73.7 million to Australian industry.

## **Recommendation 5**

The Committee recommends the Government consider opportunities to enhance Australia's soft-power and people-to-people ties in the Pacific, including educational exchanges and supporting Australian non-government organisations' initiatives.

## **Response to Recommendation 5**

The Australian Government supports the recommendation.

Through OTP, the Australian Government coordinates a range of programs that enhance our people-to-people ties in the Pacific. These programs range from sports (PacificAus Sports focuses on building elite sports pathways), churches (through our Pacific Church Partnership Program), to a range of regional education and skills programs (Australia Awards, and the University of the South Pacific partnership). Additionally, OTP delivers the Pacific Labour Scheme, and Australian Pacific Training Coalition, which are designed to enhance education and labour linkages between Australia and the region.

The Australia Pacific Security College is another key initiative of the Pacific Step-up. The Australian National University manages the implementation of the College under a contract with DFAT. Designed to enhance Pacific strategic security capabilities and alumni people-to-people links, the College delivers programs and technical assistance, including supporting development of Pacific nations' national security strategies.

Through the Partnerships for Recovery COVID-19 development response, Australia continues to work at the community level to enhance pandemic preparedness and sanitation. In doing so, Australia supports the extensive family and community church networks that exist in the Pacific and Timor-Leste and build on the deep relationships that exist between Australian non-

government organisations, the Red Cross movement and community groups across the region.

Through the DCP, Defence provides training and education programs that enhance Australia's soft-power and people-to-people ties in the Pacific. Some of these programs include the Defence Cooperation Scholarship Program, Australian Defence College, single service training, joint training and seconded officer programs. These programs are designed to support students from Pacific nations to develop skills and/or knowledge in areas beneficial to both Defence and police organisations. In particular, the Australian Defence College provides professional military education and training for select personnel in Pacific Defence Forces. These training and education programs help build enduring relationships with Pacific security agencies.

This engagement has continued during COVID-19. Between July 2020 and end of April 2021, approximately 120 Pacific students have undertaken training in Australia on long term courses including ADF Staff College, officer cadet training at Royal Military College Duntroon, ab-initio training, university masters programs and various service courses. English language and cyber awareness training has continued remotely.

Under the Pacific Step-up, Defence is expanding its sports engagement through the Pacific Sports Program, which aims to build people-to-people links between security forces, increase sporting capability and improve fitness. ADF Rugby League has adapted to COVID-19 travel restrictions by initiating virtual training to accredit Pacific trainers, coaches and referees and build sports capacity. The first of these programs was conducted in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in November 2020. The intent is to continue these programs until face to face engagement can resume.

Defence has a long standing history of cooperation with many Pacific nations in hydrography and nautical



charting, helping those nations build sovereign capacity and capability in this area. Hydrographic support contributes to increased maritime trade and commerce, protection of the marine environment and nations' commitments to international treaties such as the Safety of Life at Sea Convention.

## **Recommendation 6**

The Committee recommends that the Government consider innovative and practical means of actively deepening its defence relationships with Pacific Island states and other powers in the region. This could include increased and enhanced integration of Australian, Pacific Island and other military forces on combined training and operations.

## **Response to Recommendation 6**

The Australian Government supports the recommendation.

The Australian Government routinely considers how to enhance security relationships to support a sovereign, stable, secure and prosperous Pacific. This includes supporting Pacific security forces through our bilateral and multilateral cooperation programs led by the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Border Force, recognising that there are a limited number of defence forces in the Pacific.

Defence continues to look for new and innovative opportunities to partner, train and exchange with Pacific militaries and other security agencies to build people-to-people relationships and interoperability.

Defence regularly participates in a number of bilateral and multilateral operations and exercises with Pacific partners. Examples include the extensive Olgeta series of exercises carried out with the PNG Defence Force, Exercise Tafakula hosted by His Majesty's Armed Forces in Tonga and the ADF's contribution to regional maritime surveillance through Operation Solania.

Defence deepens its defence partnerships with Pacific nations and other powers in the region as part of the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM). Through SPDMM, members (Australia, PNG, Tonga, Fiji,

New Zealand, Chile and France) pursue initiatives and activities that support enhanced regional security cooperation and coordination, including through the POVAI ENDEAVOUR Framework for Cooperation. This framework supports the development of core skills and helps maintain interoperability by encouraging cooperation between regional forces. Examples include capstone activities in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) (Exercise Croix du Sud), maritime security (Operation Kuru Kuru) and peacekeeping (Exercise Southern Katipo).

The Pacific Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group (PQUAD) brings together regional likeminded partners (Australia, United States, France and New Zealand) to deepen engagement in the Pacific and de-conflict maritime security efforts. The PQUAD allows partners to be responsive to Pacific needs.

## **Recommendation 7**

The Committee recommends the Government investigate further opportunities for defence cooperation in the Pacific region with likeminded nations, including New Zealand, the United States, Canada, Japan, France and the United Kingdom.

## **Response to Recommendation 7**

The Australian Government supports the recommendation.

Australia cooperates closely with likeminded partners in the Pacific, in consultation with Pacific nations. Defence regularly participates in bilateral and multilateral exercises, such as exercises Croix du Sud, Marara (France-led) and Southern Katipo (New Zealand-led) and operations with likeminded and Pacific security forces through Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA)-led operations such as Kuru Kuru, Island Chief and Tui Moana. This includes regional maritime security operations and exercises undertaken in collaboration with our PQUAD partners.

Annually, Australia participates in a number of fora such as the Joint Heads of Pacific Security meeting, allowing us to raise issues of mutual concern and identify how best to coordinate our efforts in the Pacific with likeminded nations. Defence's engagement with likemindeds stresses the need for regional cooperation to be driven by Pacific interests and responsive to priorities aligned with the Boe Declaration on Regional Security.

## **Recommendation 8**

The Committee recommends that the Government and Defence expand existing programs (including the Defence Cooperation Program and Pacific Maritime Security Program), considerate of the need to maintain Pacific Island states' sovereignty, with the aim of further deepening institutional and people-to-people links with Pacific partners.

## **Response to Recommendation 8**

The Australian Government notes the recommendation.

The Australian Government regularly assesses requirements and benefits of current programs. The Australian Government acknowledges there may be opportunities to expand existing programs to further deepen links with the Pacific subject to resource availability, while recognising the importance of maintaining and strengthening Pacific sovereignty through our engagement.

## **Recommendation 9**

The Committee recommends that Government offer to assist with increased intelligence capacity and sharing of and with Pacific Island countries to support a broader range of security objectives, including maritime domain awareness and maritime security operations.

## **Response to Recommendation 9**

The Australian Government supports the recommendation.

The Australian Government leads a range of information sharing initiatives that support a broad range of security objectives. As part of the Pacific Step-up, the Australian Government has enhanced its intelligence engagement with Pacific partners, including delivering capacity building initiatives and increased intelligence sharing on issues of mutual security interest. The National Intelligence Community's program of engagement is coordinated by the Office of National Intelligence in accordance with Government's direction to deepen security integration with the region.

The Pacific Fusion Centre is a flagship initiative led by OTP that aims to strengthen Pacific regional security domain awareness, foster a culture of information sharing and build the strategic analysis capability of Pacific nations. The Centre builds capacity through a secondment program and distributes open source security assessments to provide awareness and a common understanding of regional security challenges. The initiative responds to long-standing calls by Pacific leaders, notably in the Pacific Islands Forum, for improved information sharing among regional governments and organisations.

As a signatory of the Niue Treaty Subsidiary Agreement, Australia is subject to a range of information sharing provisions with 13 parties across

the Pacific. This creates a minimum standard of fisheries data and intelligence to be exchanged between Parties, promoting maritime domain awareness. Information can be used for broader law enforcement purposes such as transnational crime or immigration investigations.

The Australian Geospatial-Intelligence Organisation (AGO) completed a 14-year project to remap the entirety of PNG, significantly improving Australia and PNG's understanding of PNG terrain. AGO is exploring the potential to support Pacific geospatial intelligence capabilities through training.

## **Recommendation 10**

The Committee recommends the Department of Defence consider additional maritime surveillance initiatives in the Pacific region. This may include an increase in frequency and intensity of existing surveillance operations and the addition of new Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) and Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUV).

## **Response to Recommendation 10**

The Australian Government notes the recommendation.

The Australian Government recognises that maritime security and domain awareness is incredibly important to the Pacific, many of whom are responsible for vast exclusive economic zones. Defence recognises this through the Pacific Maritime Security Program, which is gifting 21 Guardian-class patrol boats to the Pacific and Timor-Leste. This program, succeeding the Pacific Patrol Boat Program, represents more than six decades of sustained maritime security engagement and underscores our commitment to the region.

More broadly, Defence works closely with Pacific nations and regional security organisations such as the FFA to ensure that Defence's maritime surveillance contributions are coordinated, demand-driven and respectful of Pacific sovereignty. For example, Defence contributes to maritime information gathering and sharing through Operation Solania, which is the ADF's contribution to FFA-led counter-illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing operations and the Pacific Maritime Security Program's aerial surveillance contract through FFA.

The Australian Government will continue to revise its maritime surveillance capacity-building support to the Pacific in line with emerging technologies and their ability to meet regional priorities.



## **Recommendation 11**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government pursue opportunities to strengthen Australia's humanitarian assistance and disaster relief response in the Pacific to effectively build the capacities of regional militaries to respond to humanitarian crises in a manner which is considerate of the impacts on women and girls.

## **Response to Recommendation 11**

The Australian Government supports the recommendation.

While the responsibility for HADR lies with civilian agencies in the affected or responding nations, militaries are often called on to contribute and HADR is a feature of our defence cooperation. Defence regularly works with partners at a time of crisis to deliver logistical and engineering support, distributing humanitarian supplies, provide aerial surveillance, undertake damage assessment and conduct search, rescue and recovery.

The 2020 Defence Strategic Update and Force Structure Plan provides the ADF with an enhanced mandate and capacity to respond to disasters, including in relation to climate change. Defence will continue to work with the Pacific to improve regional resilience and HADR capability consistent with these policies. Defence also encourages Australian industry engagement to identify innovative approaches.

Through SPDMM, Defence is supporting Fiji-led efforts to develop a regional HADR framework. The framework will complement efforts in the Pacific Island Forum to develop a Strategic Roadmap for Emergency Management and strengthen Pacific militaries' responses to crises. Defence welcomes and supports Pacific-led solutions to improve HADR responses.

Australia is a signatory to the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security, which recognises an expanded concept of security inclusive of human security and humanitarian assistance, prioritising environmental security, and regional cooperation in building resilience to disasters and climate change, including through regional cooperation and support.

The 2020 Defence Gender, Peace and Security Mandate commits Defence to integrating gender, peace and security principles across the breadth and complexity of Defence international engagement. Defence is also implementing Department under Australia's second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2021-2031 launched by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs/Women, Defence and Home Affairs on 12 April 2021. Outcome 3 of the second NAP undertakes to 'support resilience, crisis and security, law and justice efforts to meet the needs and rights of all women and girls'. In meeting these commitments, Defence has included a gender advisor on HADR operations in the Pacific. We will continue to consider the different needs of women, men, boys and girls throughout preparedness planning and the conduct of emergency assistance.

COVID-19 has affected how Defence delivers HADR. Defence has adapted by developing COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures to ensure the ADF can deliver HADR and other support in a safe manner. These were tested in Australia's response to Tropical Cyclone Yasa in December 2020. At Fiji's request, the ADF partnered with the Republic of Fiji Military Force (RFMF) to deliver humanitarian supplies, clear debris, generate clean drinking water and repair damaged schools.

Defence continues to deliver HADR engagement virtually during COVID-19 including Exercise Longreach, which delivers targeted preparedness and response forums to improve readiness, interoperability and share lessons.

Australia has benefited from the growing HADR capabilities of Pacific militaries. In 2020, 54 RFMF, 100 PNG Defence Force and 116 New Zealand Defence Force personnel deployed to support Australia's bushfire crisis response. This was the first time Pacific military personnel deployed to support an Australian disaster. This, and the RFMF's support to Australia's flood response in early 2021, exemplifies the mutual trust and respect that underpins our defence partnerships and demonstrated the invaluable role Pacific militaries can perform in response to a crisis. The Australian Government again thanks Fiji, PNG and New Zealand for their support.

